

## INTRODUCTION: LOCATING HIP-HOP'S PLACE WITHIN LATIN AMERICAN CULTURAL STUDIES

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In the summer of 2002, as a PhD student of Spanish (Latin American Literatures and Cultures), I was in Colombia conducting preliminary dissertation research when I inadvertently stumbled across the local hip-hop scene. Early one morning in Bogotá while sitting in Cimarrón (an Afro-Colombian political and cultural organization), I noticed a poster of several young black rappers from a group called Ghettos Clan. As someone who witnessed hip-hop and rap's explosion onto U.S. mainstream culture in the 1980s, I was naturally curious. However, I was in the country hoping to find an up-and-coming generation of Afro-Colombian fiction writers addressing contemporary issues impacting the country's black communities—neoliberal economic reform, globalization, racism, narcotraffic, the armed conflict, etc. Above all, I wanted to know who was going to carry on the black literary traditions established by the likes of Manuel Zapata Olivella, Carlos Truque, and Arnolfo Palacios, to name a few. My quest, though, was not going well, and so with my trip coming to an end, I decided to give in to my whim and see where my interest in Afro-Colombian hip-hop and rap would lead.

It was recommended that I visit Esperanza Bioho's Fundación Cultural Colombia Negra (<http://colombianegra.webs.com/>). I was told that at this cultural arts center I would find young performers of Afro-Colombian "traditional" music and dance who, ironically, would be able to inform me about the national hip-hop scene, and more specifically, about local hip-hop artists. After a brief conversation with Esperanza, I moseyed over to the dance floor to watch the kids rehearse. It would be my first introduction not only to music styles associated with Colombia's

black communities of the Pacific littoral, but also the types of transcultural musical material that eventually would become one of the focal points of my later scholarship. To my surprise, during a break, the musicians used traditional instruments to perform an acoustic rendition of a contemporary U.S. R&B hit (if memory serves me correctly, I believe it was “Hot in Herre” by Nelly). Long story short, these young artists connected me to a local disc jockey who, in turn, put me in contact with an Afro-Colombian rapper nicknamed, Tostao. I vividly remember the day he and I met. I was walking down Carrera Séptima (Seventh Avenue) in downtown Bogotá when I spotted him strutting toward me in a black jacket and Nike tennis shoes. At that time, Tostao was part of a rap duo called Mensajeros. He was eager to talk about his music, and truth be told, I was instantly drawn to his charismatic personality. I invited him to lunch and we spent the afternoon discussing hip-hop and racial matters in Colombia. He sold me several CDs of Afro-Colombian hip-hop artists, and after exchanging emails, we said our goodbyes. I returned to the U.S. for my last year of graduate coursework at The Ohio State University not sure what I was going to do, if anything, with my newly acquired music. I would not talk again with Tostao until returning to Colombia almost two years later.

I remember listening to my recently purchased CDs of groups such as Ghettos Clan, Mensajeros, Zona Marginal, and Asilo 38 and, at first, being much more impressed with the lyrical content than the production quality of the music. To the untrained ear, it sounded like poor imitations of 1990’s gangsta rap. The rhythms were slow and methodic and the melodies were dark and dreary. Nevertheless, through their lyrical narratives, these young men were addressing many of the more pressing issues weighing on the country’s black communities. In other words, what I was hoping to uncover in narrative fiction I actually found in the lyrics of Afro-Colombian rap. During conversations with my then academic advisor, Abril Trigo, about possible dissertation topics, my excitement for this youth culture and its music was palpable. Anyone familiar with Trigo’s contributions to the field of Latin American cultural studies will not be surprised to learn that he encouraged me to pursue my interest in Afro-Colombian hip-hop while assuring me that the Department of Spanish and Portuguese would support such a research project. After all, my previous coursework under both Trigo and Ileana Rodríguez had introduced me to Latin American cultural studies as a viable academic discipline. Eventually, I

received a Fulbright research grant, which afforded me the opportunity to reunite with Tostao (along with his current group, ChocQuibTown) and spend a year conducting fieldwork among many of the country's hip-hop artists. My scholarly activities and research on (Afro)Colombian hip-hop led to a dissertation, conference presentations, articles, and a book. And this journey that began in the summer of 2002 continues to introduce me to so many inspirational people who have had a profound impact on my life and career. When it all started, I had no idea that hip-hop—and Latin American cultural studies—would be so good to me.

I chose to share my personal experiences with both hip-hop and Latin American cultural studies because I can only assume that my account parallels that of many other students and scholars in U.S. graduate programs. Without a doubt, the acceptance and growth of this academic discipline in U.S. universities and colleges over the last fifteen to twenty years have inspired many academics to embark on investigative journeys and produce scholarly works that were previously unthinkable. Furthermore, I trust that my experiences are similar to those of many students and scholars who specifically come from Spanish and Portuguese departments and/or Latin American studies programs in U.S. universities where Latin American cultural studies has most firmly taken root, in large part owing to the influx of Latin American scholars and intellectuals into the United States in the 1970s and 1980s (Trigo, "The 1990s" 347). As stated in the "Presentación" of the *Diccionario de estudios culturales latinoamericanos*, "como los departamentos de español y portugués son los únicos espacios académicos en los países no hispanoparlantes donde se estudia América Latina tanto en español como en portugués, éstos han resultado el ámbito clave para la institucionalización de los estudios culturales latinoamericanos en el extranjero" (Irwin and Szurmuk 28). Certainly, despite any degree of opposition to Latin American cultural studies in U.S. institutions of higher learning, many Spanish language departments and Latin American studies programs have embraced this ever-developing field, and I was fortunate to have a sympathetic group of professors and mentors who supported and encouraged my interdisciplinary endeavors.

## ***I. Latin American Cultural Studies and Hip-Hop***

### ***A. Popular Culture and the Margins***

Though sometimes thought to be a rather ambiguously defined academic field, Latin American cultural studies certainly features several defining characteristics that bear mentioning. In what is perhaps the most comprehensive anthology on the subject, *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader* (Del Sarto et al. 2004), Abril Trigo explains that Latin American cultural studies should not be considered “a branch of some universal ‘cultural studies’ or as a supplement of British or U.S. cultural studies, but as a full-fledged field of inquiry that has its own historical problematics and trajectories” (“General Introduction” 2). More specifically, Latin American cultural studies represents a discipline focusing on “the symbolic production and living experiences of social reality in Latin America ... [W]hat can be read as a cultural text, what carries a sociohistorical symbolic meaning and is intertwined with various discursive formations, could become a legitimate object of inquiry, from art and literature, to sports and media, to social lifestyles, beliefs, and feelings” (3-4). In a word, Latin American cultural studies examines all sorts of cultural production and practices, from those considered “high culture” to those of so-called “low culture.”

Of course, the last few decades have been witness to mounting scholarly interest across disciplines in popular culture as a legitimate object of academic analysis. When considering the reasons behind popular culture’s rising academic significance, recognition is often given to 1) postmodern theories that deconstruct metanarratives and challenge essentialisms while instead emphasizing differences, multifaceted identities, and social fragmentation; and 2) globalization with its new regime of capital accumulation based on the diversification of markets and consumer differences, post-Fordist styles of organization, culture as a resource, symbolic goods, lifestyles, and identity (Hall 181). Latin American cultural studies specifically developed “as a hermeneutical and critical response to the economic, social, political, and cultural transformations of Latin American countries and societies under the impact of transnational finance capitalism and the globalization of culture experienced since the early 1970s” (Trigo, “General Introduction” 6-7). Accordingly, the discipline necessarily has focused on the “added social and symbolic value acquired by the cultural in everyday life, as a consequence of the new economic centrality of the symbolic—and primarily of transnational mass culture—in the information age” (13). Furthermore, while the postmodern tenet

recognizing difference was readily accepted in Latin America insofar as it provided new perspectives and insights relevant to the region's complex heterogeneous nature, "the debate revolved around the pertinence of the debate. To simply celebrate cultural multiplicity, admixture, and plurality without relating them to power and social inequalities was a futile mimetic exercise" (Del Sarto 174).

Latin American cultural studies, therefore, addresses genuine concerns regarding questions of unequal power relations and the plight of marginalized groups as a lingering consequence of colonization and/or the result of neoliberal globalization. And the "difference between current Latin American cultural studies and traditional Latin American thought is that the latter bet on the integrative capability of national literatures and art, while the former questions them as apparatuses of power" (Trigo, "General Introduction" 6). In other words, writing itself has been challenged as an ideological tool tightly bound to dominant classes and institutions of power from which society's downtrodden all too often have been excluded, thus validating the need to examine other forms of cultural production. Consequently, while all cultural artifacts and expressive forms may be fair game for Latin American cultural studies, there has been a growing tendency among scholars and cultural critics alike to focus attention away from the "high culture" of the elites and toward quotidian practices, expressive forms, and local narratives emerging from the periphery: "La otra característica fundamental de los estudios culturales latinoamericanos es que se ocupan de las culturas (o subculturas) tradicionalmente marginadas, incluyendo las de los grupos subalternos o de comunidades de alguna forma desprestigiadas por su raza, sexo, preferencia sexual, etc." (Irwin and Szurmuk 10). In effect, it could be argued that the cultural production and practices of marginalized groups have come to occupy a privileged space in Latin American cultural studies.

As a form of popular culture emerging primarily from Latin American impoverished youth, hip-hop, therefore, is a fitting object of academic analysis, and it is particularly suited for scholars of Latin American cultural studies. Popular music, in general, has received a great deal of attention within academia as a form of transnational cultural production that cuts across folklore, media, race, class, nation, gender, sexuality, performance, and social identities (Aparicio and Jáquez 2). During the last few decades, perhaps no other form of transnational

popular culture has captivated the attention of Latin/o American youth quite like hip-hop and rap have done. From a cultural and musical phenomenon that originated among African American, Caribbean (Jamaican), and Hispanic youth in the Bronx, hip-hop has evolved into an ecumenical signifying practice offering new dimensions of meaning to youth groups all over the world. Largely due to its associations with impoverished Black and Hispanic youth in U.S. urban milieus, hip-hop has circulated the globe as a cultural and musical practice almost exclusively for marginalized youth. Of course, hip-hop's class and ethnic meanings largely arise from the manner in which multinational entertainment corporations have marketed the street (and ethnic) gist of U.S. rap, and without a doubt, today's Latin/o American hip-hop artists are representatives of a generation that has been inundated by mass-mediated, racialized, and gendered messages of African-American commodified resistance. Whatever the reasons may be for hip-hop's pervasive spread among certain socio-economic sectors and ethnic groups, marginalized youth from all over Latin America are now practicing hip-hop as a cultural and musical medium for voicing their concerns on a slew of social issues, which is exactly why hip-hop provides such a rich venue for study. Case in point, as part of my undergraduate and graduate seminars on the subject, I ask students to search for Latin/o American hip-hop artists and then post on a message board links to the performers' websites, music, and videos. By the end of the semester, practically every Latin American nation is represented. Hip-hop in Latin America, in other words, is not a passing fad; it has been around for years and it only continues to grow, as the scholarship assembled in this special number of *alter/nativas* demonstrates.

Though there is still much work to be done on Latin/o American hip-hop, numerous studies have been published that merit mention. Juan Flores' *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (2000) and Raquel Z. Rivera's *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* (2003) have added greatly to our understandings of the Puerto Rican contributions to U.S. hip-hop culture; Pancho McFarland's *Chicano Rap: Gender and Violence in the Postindustrial Barrio* (2008) provides significant insights into Chicano hip-hop; Sujatha Fernandes' various publications— *Cuba Represent!: Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures* (2006); *Who Can Stop the Drums?: Urban Social Movements in Chávez's Venezuela* (2010); and *Close to the Edge: In Search of the Global Hip Hop Generation*

(2011)—have broadened our knowledge of both the Cuban and Venezuelan hip-hop scenes; and my own work, *Afro-Colombian Hip-Hop: Globalization, Transculturation, and Ethnic Identities* (2011), has brought the Afro-Colombian brand of hip-hop into the discussion. Additional researchers who also have published noteworthy books on Latin/o American hip-hop and who have kindly contributed to this scholarly collection include Derek Pardue (*Brazilian Hip Hoppers Speak from the Margins: We's on Tape* [2011]) and Geoffrey Baker (*Buena Vista in the Club: Rap, Reggaetón, and Revolution in Havana [Refiguring American Music]* [2011]). Furthermore, contributor Melisa Rivière not only is a scholar of hip-hop studies, but also someone who actively participates in hip-hop culture as both an artist and audiovisual producer. Lastly, while this collection brings together articles from some of the field's more established researchers, it also contains work from relatively new scholars breaking ground on rarely addressed national hip-hop scenes in countries such as Chile, Panama, El Salvador, and Peru. Interestingly enough, a common thread connecting the numerous hip-hop expressions analyzed in both past and present scholarship is the emphasis placed on marginalized youth who employ this cultural and musical practice as a way to denounce the social ills weighing on their communities. The articles assembled here address U.S. Latino/Chicano and Latin American hip-hop performers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and national contexts who turn to hip-hop in their struggles against unequal power relations.

### ***B. Politics and Transformation***

Another key component of Latin American cultural studies involves the discipline's anti-hegemonic stance on social and political issues (Irwin and Szurmuk 10). In effect, "the political is medullary to any project within Latin American cultural studies ... Latin American intellectuals have always been intricately linked to politics and the political, both in theory and practice" (Trigo, "General Introduction" 8). And this emphasis on the political reflects Latin American cultural studies' endless but necessary quest for that ever-evasive utopia; in other words, there is a commitment to the discipline's transformative potential (Irwin and Szurmuk 10). For students and scholars of Latin American cultural studies, therefore, hip-hop is especially appealing as a popular culture practice through which youth challenge hegemony, question dominant representations of social reality, construct identities, and attempt to engender

positive changes within their respective communities. Even though globalization often works through old and new processes of racialization and oppression, recent restructuring of capitalism—especially in the cultural sphere—has resulted in new modes of contestation and resistance—such as hip-hop—often allowing individuals to enter global networks in creative and sometimes lucrative ways. While most of the scholarship in this collection deals with artists who have yet to receive (or perhaps even resist) widespread acclaim, one does not have to look far to find Latin/o American hip-hop artists who have managed to achieve commercial success while taking their music and its messages to international audiences: Tego Calderón and Calle 13 from Puerto Rico, ChocQuibTown from Colombia, Ana Tijoux from Chile, and Orishas from Cuba, to name just a few.

Indeed, most of the studies assembled in this anthology point to Latin/o American performers who use hip-hop as a means for raising awareness about life on the periphery. These unique hip-hop expressions provide evidence of what Stuart Hall has identified as a profound cultural revolution that “has come about as a consequence of the margins coming into representation—in art, in painting, in film, in music, in literature, in the modern arts everywhere, in politics, and in the social life generally” (183). Even social pariahs have found hip-hop to be an accessible and effective medium for narrating their own stories about life on the margins. In his work, “Hip Hop is not Dead: The Emergence of Mara Salvatrucha Rap as a Form of MS-13 Expressive Culture,” Alejandro Jacky illustrates how the members of this transnational street gang employ hip-hop as a means for both constructing identities and forging a sense of belonging to their social group. In contrast to the manner in which the gang typically is portrayed or even demonized through international media and “expert” analysis, Jacky’s study demonstrates the way in which MS-13 rappers choose to represent themselves, their precarious living conditions, and their motivation for joining such an infamous street gang.

Though the music produced by MS-13 seems to flaunt the gang members’ marginality while showing little concern for a true restructuring of society, most of the hip-hop analyzed in these studies points to socially conscious artists who turn to this musical and cultural practice not only as a conduit for telling their stories, but also as a strategy for generating change. Though we should be careful not to over-romanticize music’s potential for producing significant



social or political transformations, the greater part of this research evinces the manner in which hip-hop certainly has led to positive outcomes, even if limited to localized contexts. In most instances, hip-hop has made a favorable impression on Latin/o American youth by at least increasing self-awareness, raising self-esteem, and engendering a stronger sense of belonging to local communities and/or ethnic groups. For example, in “Hip-hop Mapuche on the Araucanian Frontera,” Jacob Rekedal explores how Mapuche rappers, Jano Weichafe, Danko Marimán, and Fabian Marin, blend hip-hop with local preexisting forms of expression and resistance in order to celebrate indigenous ancestry and actively participate in the struggle for social equality. Rekedal uncovers the manner in which groups of inner-city youth, as well as Mapuche organizations, employ hip-hop to both cultivate indigenous ceremonies in urban milieus and engage vulnerable youth in constructive activities. Furthermore, even small-scale changes have the potential to spread and bring about larger socio-political transformations when youth become cognizant and critical of oppressive societal structures, a type of coming into consciousness that hip-hop often spurs. Though most Latin/o American hip-hop performers choose not to get directly involved in their respective political scenes, history has taught us that even non-political music can spill over into the political sphere. Melisa Rivière’s work, “Between ► (Play) and ◀◀ (Rewind): The Making of *Son Dos Alas*,” undeniably suggests that the ruling elites are very aware of music’s potential to move and inspire people toward change, explaining why the Cuban and U.S. governments have closely followed her work on Cuban hip-hop.

In her article, “A política do hip hop nas favelas brasileiras,” Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda specifically calls attention to the positive impact that hip-hop has had on Brazil’s impoverished youth. Concerned with the world’s growing urban slums, particularly in developing countries such as those found in Latin America, she places the brunt of the blame on neoliberal reform and the state’s diminishing presence in the lives of its inhabitants. Brazil, for example, has the third largest urban poor population in the world, and along with it, a robust hip-hop movement. It should come as little surprise, therefore, that Brazilian hip-hop has been of great interest to many of today’s hip-hop scholars. Buarque de Hollanda suggests that the use of culture as a resource (Yúdice 2003), in this case hip-hop culture, can serve as an effective response to the state’s withdrawal from social life. She specifically examines the

efforts of 1) the Grupo Cultural AfroReggae, an NGO dedicated to getting youth off the streets and out of drug trafficking; and 2) the literary works of writers such as Ferréz (“marginal” literature), Sergio Vaz, and Alessandro Buzo who have integrated literature into the Brazilian hip-hop movement as a way to mobilize youth on behalf of their cultural rights.

Along with Buarque de Hollanda, a few other scholars included in this special number of *alter/nativas* also have contributed studies addressing the transformative potential of Brazilian hip-hop. In his article, “Pop Speculation: Tracing Geography, Investment, and Identity in São Paulo’s Hip Hop and Open Mic Scenes,” Derek Pardue looks at some of the larger social consequences prompted by the Brazilian hip-hop movement. Through a combination of ethnographic reflections, urban cultural histories, and social theories of speculation, he maintains that local hip-hop artists’ active participation in institution-building projects (*casas de hip hop*) and open microphone circuits (*saraus*) has impacted “the flows of investment and the social geography of expressive culture in São Paulo.” Due to the work of local artists and hip-hop participants, “the value of the marginalized periphery has changed and with it the overall conceptualization” of the city. Furthermore, in their article, “Projeto Yabas: Reflections on Hip Hop and Black Women’s Self-making in Recife, Brazil,” Viviane Santiago da Silva and Cory J. LaFevers specifically examine the work of Brazilian female rappers and the manner in which they engage hip-hop as a medium for both celebrating their blackness and combatting sexism. Santiago da Silva and LaFevers speak to the achievements of Projeto Yabas, a collaborative community-based project working to facilitate young female hip-hop artists’ sense of self as Black women in their struggles against racial discrimination and sexual domestic violence in Recife, Brazil.

### **C. A Multidisciplinary Approach**

Another trait frequently ascribed to Latin American cultural studies involves the field’s multi-, inter- or transdisciplinary approach to the analysis of cultural production and cultural artifacts. Irwin and Szurmuk, for example, refer to Latin American cultural studies as “una empresa interdisciplinaria y multifacética enfocada en la cultura latinoamericana” (9). Certainly, “It has become sort of commonsensical to affirm that the most characteristic feature of Latin American cultural studies is their multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary

methodology” (Trigo, “General Introduction” 8). However, Latin American cultural studies should not be reduced to any particular methodological framework given that multi-, inter- or transdisciplinarity have long been an integral part of Latin American thought beginning with the critical essay tradition and the “nineteenth-century polygraph intellectual (the lawyer by profession who was also a poet, a journalist, an ideologue, a politician, a statesman)” (9). Even before the transdisciplinary approach was formerly institutionalized, Latin American critical thought “already traversed discursive formations, confused social spheres, and contaminated the disciplines” (9). As Ana Del Sarto affirms, “Latin American cultural studies are imbued with a cluster of methodologies, critical and theoretical paradigms, and cognitive constellations forged at different moments in the intricate trajectory of Latin American cultural criticism and thought” (157).

Of course, Latin American hip-hop largely revolves around music, and rap offers a type of narrative recited to the music’s rhythm that lends itself well to discursive critiques, and hence, the benefit of a literary analysis, as illustrated in Mónica Bernabé’s article entitled, “Rap: poesía pleyeba.” Bernabé acknowledges that most scholarship on hip-hop has focused on the practice’s sociological implications perhaps at the expense of its aesthetic qualities. Thus, in her work, she explores rap’s diction and poetic elements in an attempt to locate its place within contemporary literary studies while also considering the more general role of aesthetics within Latin American cultural studies. Furthermore, in her article, “Itinerarios líricos de la inclusión: el hip-hop y el rap en Colombia,” María del Pilar Ramírez Gröbli also carries out a discursive analysis of hip-hop lyrics so as to 1) highlight particular forms of social exclusion denounced through rap; and 2) identify specific symbols and elements used by Colombian hip-hop artists in the construction of their social identities.

Hip-hop, however, not only involves lyrical discourses, but also the different artistic practices surrounding the music (e.g., graffiti, breakdance, DJing). Rap, in other words, is only one component of a hip-hop culture that is best understood when examined through a multitude of disciplinary lenses. For instance, one cannot disregard the socio-economic milieus that inspire this always-evolving youth culture, its music and various expressive forms. Though the expanding popularity of hip-hop naturally raises important questions about unequal

(inter)national power relations and U.S. cultural imperialism, the scholarship assembled in this collection demonstrates that local scenarios and input result in distinctive hip-hop discourses and artistic forms. For this reason, hip-hop necessarily requires a consideration of the socio-political, economic and cultural contexts from which it emerges, and thus, the benefit of historical, economic, political, sociological, and/or anthropological analyses. Perhaps as to be expected, the scholars participating in this special number of *alter/nativas* come from a variety of academic disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, Spanish/Latin American literature, rhetoric, film studies, music, and ethnomusicology, each one with its own unique set of analytical tools and perspectives. In the end, the combination of disciplinary approaches found in these scholarly pieces lead to a much broader and perhaps more complete understanding of Latin/o American hip-hop and its many, often localized, manifestations.

When considering the theoretical approaches applied to the analysis of Latin/o American hip-hop, it is worthwhile to underline a few of these studies that raise questions about the scholar's responsibilities and/or influence. After all, Latin American cultural studies and critical thought often have addressed the intellectual's political role (Trigo, "General Introduction" 10). By drawing from the works of Kurt Lewin (1951), Paulo Freire (1970), Orlando Fals Borda (1988) and Antonio Gramsci (1971), Melisa Rivière conducted collaborative fieldwork in which she studied *with* rather than *on* her subjects, bringing to mind Catherine Walsh's (2007) stance on the importance of "thinking with" collective subjects as a de-colonial practice that could potentially lead to new social, political and epistemic articulations. Rivière's work outlines a process in which she, as the researcher, and the hip-hop performers, as her subjects of study, together produced songs and videos, which resulted in the creation of a "place" for anthropological inquiry, a methodology she calls Participatory Ethnographic Production (PEP). Santiago da Silva and LaFevers, in their work on Brazilian hip-hop, also point to the scholars' direct participation with the performers. These two researchers, along with local hip-hop artists, actively took part in the abovementioned community-based project, Projeto Yabas. Lastly, in his article, "Represent Cuba: Havana Hip Hop Under the Lens," Geoff Baker also calls attention to the role of the investigator when conducting research and documenting forms of popular culture. While Santiago da Silva, LaFevers and Rivière indicate ways in which scholars can get

directly involved in the creative process, Baker presents a more critical view from within a film studies perspective at the impact that documentary makers have had on the Cuban hip-hop scene. He argues that while documentaries have provided Havana rappers with an avenue for spreading their voices, they also have subjected artists to the “tourist gaze” while actively influencing—often in a negative way—the local hip-hop scene.

## ***II. Expanding Meanings of Hip-Hop***

The scholarship collected in this special number of *alter/nativas* most likely will challenge certain assumptions often made about hip-hop. For example, though hip-hop is almost exclusively understood as a cultural and musical practice tied to the metropolis, in his essay titled, “‘Searching and searching we have come to find’: Histories and Circulations of Hip Hop in Peru,” Kyle Jones maps out ways in which it has evolved outside Peru’s large cities while paying special attention to local-local exchanges taking place between different national localities. Though we often presume that globalization and the advancement of communication technologies alone have led to the worldwide spread of hip-hop, Jones’ work highlights alternative paths of dissemination, particularly those resulting from human mobility.

Additionally, while hip-hop historically has been socially defined as a form of “black music,” Latin/o American hip-hop complicates simplistic associations made between cultural production and any one ethnic group. Again, Flores and Rivera’s groundbreaking studies already have highlighted the importance of expanding the ethnic-racial meanings of U.S. hip-hop so as to recognize Puerto Rican contributions. Furthermore, Tony Mitchell’s edited volume, *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-hop Outside the USA* (2001), also points to the multinational and multicultural aspects of a now global hip-hop culture, though his book unfortunately lacks any scholarship on Latin American hip-hop. Amanda Martinez-Morrison’s article, “Black and Tan Realities: Chicanos in the Borderlands of the Hip-Hop Nation,” adds to these discussions while suggesting the need for more scholarship on Chicano contributions to past and present hip-hop expressions and practices. Drawing on ethnographic observations, she analyzes the racial dynamics of the hip-hop scene in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her work explores the multiethnic nature of local hip-hop along with the cultural exchanges that take place among local actors,

specifically among Latino and Black performers. Martinez-Morrison explains how Bay Area Chicanos articulate their own emerging ethnic identity through hip-hop while simultaneously recognizing commonality with the region's other ethnic groups.

Indeed, a few of these articles will even test commonly held definitions of hip-hop, such as Cruz Medina's article, "'(Who Discovered) America': Ozomatli and the Mestiz@ Rhetoric of Hip Hop." Though some readers may disagree with labeling Ozomatli as a hip-hop group, Medina's work nonetheless reveals how hip-hop—and the cultural and musical exchanges to which Martinez-Morrison refers—has impacted other music genres and practices. By highlighting Ozomatli's multicultural musical fusions that borrow from diverse traditions such as *banda*, *cumbia*, *merengue* and *ranchera*, he argues that Ozomatli produces their own brand of hip-hop embodying a cultural *mestizaje*, mestiza consciousness, and mestiz@ rhetoric through which they call attention to transnational issues of social justice. Similarly, Sonja Stephenson Watson's article, "'Reading' National Identity in Panama through Renato, a first Generation Panamanian *reggae en español* Artist," also challenges or perhaps broadens generally held interpretations of hip-hop. She addresses *reggae en español* as a hybrid musical form drawing from hip-hop and Jamaican dancehall and reggae while highlighting certain links between Panamanian reggae artists and the hip-hop movement. Perhaps more significantly, Watson's analysis of the music and lyrical narratives of first generation Panamanian *reggaesero*, Leonardo "Renato" Aulder, illustrates how this performer attempted to redefine Panamanian national identity in much more inclusive terms.

Watson's work on *reggae en español* briefly touches on *reggaetón*, and indeed, further scholarship on this music genre would have been a welcome addition, if anything, as a way to engage recent debates on whether *reggaetón* is (a type of) hip-hop. Typically defined as dance music appearing in the 1990s, its origins can be traced to both Puerto Rico and Panama. *Reggaetón* emerged primarily from the combination of hip-hop with Jamaican reggae and dancehall and it is easily identifiable thanks to its particular *riddim* or percussion pattern known as the *dembow*. According to the book *Reggaeton* (2009), perhaps the most complete collection of scholarly texts on the genre, "Though reggaeton is indebted—historically, aesthetically, discursively—to hip-hop, there are nevertheless deep rifts that separate the

genres in the minds of consumers, critics, practitioners, and music industry insiders” (Marshall et al. 9). My own personal research in Colombia taught me that among most, but not all, hip-hop artists, *reggaetón* is commonly perceived as superficial dance music that exalts wanton lifestyles and the sexual objectification of women; in other words, it is not considered “real” hip-hop.

Nonetheless, definitions of hip-hop often vary from context to context, as suggested by Rivera’s explanation of what she calls the “hip hop zone”:

Hip hop is a fluid cultural space, a zone whose boundaries are an internal and external matter of debate. A profoundly diverse, translocal, multiethnic and multiracial cultural phenomenon, hip hop expressions also can present themselves as exclusionary, for aesthetic, regional, gender, sexual-orientation, national, ethnic, racial, class or myriad other reasons. The dynamic tensions within hip hop and its constant drawing and crossing of borders are better addressed by the somewhat ambiguous concept of a “hip hop zone” than by frequently adopted but more limiting (and, in my opinion, questionable) terms like “hip hop community” and “hip hop nation.” (15)

She goes on to describe this hip-hop zone as one with a core and subzones, a perspective that would seemingly recognize *reggaetón* as part of a larger and perhaps more loosely-defined hip-hop culture: “Within the larger hip hop zone exist a great many subzones, most of which are interconnected and/or overlap. There is a Boricua/Latino centric rap scene in New York, which has been closely affiliated with the rap and *reggaetón* music of Puerto Rico (at times also called *underground*)” (16). Furthermore, there are self-defined hip-hop artists in Latin America who experiment with many musical forms, including *reggaetón*. In his essay, “Tego Calderón: defendiendo lo negro desde Loíza,” Francisco David Mesa Muñoz shows how this Puerto Rican musician internationally known for his *reggaetón* actually produces music that incorporates a plethora of genres and rhythms, particularly those drawing from his African roots. According to Mesa, Tego Calderón uses hip-hop as a musical medium for denouncing racism in Puerto Rico, celebrating the island’s African heritage, and instilling his listeners with a sense of ethnic-racial pride. In the end, regardless of whether one agrees that such artists truly produce hip-hop, it is my hope that the addition of scholarship on performers such as Ozomatli, Renato, and Tego

Calderón will contribute new insights and perspectives to these debates. Perhaps more importantly, the diverse aesthetic forms and musical amalgamations addressed in these articles reveal that, under today's context of globalization, it has become increasingly difficult to categorize musical creations or even locate them in specific regional or national territories.

### **III. Final Thoughts**

An edited anthology of this nature faces the challenge of trying to provide readers with a fair representation of the peoples, perspectives, and expressive forms found among the diverse Latin/o American hip-hop scenes. Ideally, this special number of *alter/nativas* would have incorporated studies on hip-hop from every Latin American country. Unfortunately, it is impossible to be entirely inclusive. This type of project inescapably succumbs to both issues of availability and processes of selection while adhering to a certain set of limitations regarding format, length, scope, etc. For example, there is a noticeable absence of scholarship on hip-hop from nations such as Mexico and Venezuela, two countries with vibrant hip-hop scenes. Nevertheless, we have managed to compile fourteen essays examining various brands of hip-hop from both U.S. Latino and Latin American artists. Hopefully, by providing scholarship addressing the artists and communities of approximately nine different countries (Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, El Salvador, Panama, Peru, Puerto Rico, and the United States) readers can begin to gain a better appreciation for the reach and significance of hip-hop in the United States and Latin America.

Perhaps this collection's most glaring flaw has to do with a common source of tension between Latin American cultural studies in the U.S. and that of Latin America: language. An important part of the debates and conversations surrounding Latin American cultural studies has to do with the predominance of the English language when writing *about* Latin America *from* the United States. Of course, this language barrier also presents substantial challenges for scholars writing *from* Latin America. The organizers of *alter/nativas* are very cognizant of this issue, and despite every effort to find work in languages other than English, only three of the fourteen articles were originally written in Spanish while one was written in Portuguese. To date, most work on Latin/o American hip-hop has made its way into print in English, as the



above-listed book titles exemplify. This is partly because English reaches larger audiences and, quite frankly, it has more profit potential. Hopefully, this collection will serve as a reminder of the importance of circulating our scholarship in languages other than English, especially among the artists and performers who make our work possible.

Despite any of its imperfections, however, this assortment of essays undeniably makes meaningful contributions to both hip-hop studies and Latin American cultural studies. Though the growing prevalence of hip-hop in Latin America naturally raises concerns about the homogenizing tendencies of globalization (i.e. “Americanization”), these authors and their works exhibit how hip-hop has been appropriated and then localized by diverse groups of Latin/o American youth. Consequently, any simplistic explanation about Latin American hip-hop as nothing more than an illustration of U.S. cultural imperialism will neither account for the diversity and creativity of hip-hop expressions nor the varied contexts from which they emerge. In effect, hip-hop represents a rich site of analysis for Latin American cultural studies as a way to explore the symbolic as well as the material effects of the global culture industries. Put differently, U.S. Latino and Latin American hip-hop offer a particularly appropriate expressive medium for studying today’s global context and all its conflicts, tensions, and contradictions.

Lastly, as an academic discipline concerned with popular culture expressions and the plight of marginalized groups, Latin American cultural studies finds in hip-hop a worthy object of academic inquiry that brings to the forefront the anger and joy, frustrations and hopes, and accomplishments and failures of youth who use this cultural and musical practice to define their place in our precipitously changing and increasingly interconnected world. Latin/o American hip-hop is not only linked to local desires and ambitions, local tragedies and experiences, but also global developments and geopolitical strategies. Much of the music addressed in these articles reflects—both through style and content—cultures, identities and affiliations that transcend national and regional boundaries. Hip-hop and rap have provided a unique space where marginalized youth have been able to articulate alternative views on a wide array of local and global issues while simultaneously establishing transnational alliances with artists and/or activists all around the world. Ultimately, this special number of *alter/nativas* shines light on the complex relationships that Latin/o American youth have had

with modernity, capitalism, globalization, popular culture, nationalism, ethnicity, identity, and gender by reading and assessing these relationships through an ever-expanding form of cultural production: hip-hop.

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